

RECREATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH (R4MH)

Principles, Guidelines and Actions for Mental Health-Friendly Recreation Programs and Places

This document contains recommendations that are, in total or in part, important to people who support adult recreation programming (i.e. from front desk staff and volunteers to senior management).

Please refer to the supplementary R4MH glossary for definitions of key terms.

Principles: The following three principles make evident the need for welcoming and inclusive recreation environments. These principles are grounded in person-centred care: recognizing that each person has intrinsic value and deserves fairness and a right to good quality of life.

- ◆ **Recreation Matters:** Recreation can have a powerful, positive impact on mental health. Moreover, an essential part of mental health recovery is involvement and inclusion in one's community; recreation programs and settings can support people to connect with others and their communities.
- ◆ **People Matter:** It is essential to value the uniqueness and diversity of all people who might experience barriers to engaging in recreation because of their mental health challenges. Included within this is being committed to recognizing and valuing people's unique strengths and abilities, and valuing people as experts in their own lives.
- ◆ **Being Welcoming Matters:** We understand the fundamental importance of welcoming and supportive environments, where all staff, volunteers, and leaders see themselves as having a role in helping people feel that they belong.

Guidelines: Statements used to determine a course of action. By definition, following a guideline is not mandatory. In this document the intention of the course of action is to make recreation programs and centers accessible and welcoming to persons with mental health challenges.

Recommended Actions: Descriptions of specific ways in which recreation personnel can act to make possible the guidelines contained herein. Note that it may not be relevant or feasible for your organization to adhere with all the guidelines and action indicators; use this list as a tool for positive change in your organization.

Overview:

These guidelines have been developed to support the development and/or enhancement of a welcoming environment in recreation settings, specifically for adults with mental health challenges.

The first four guidelines presented below are intended to support the actions and interactions of *all personnel* (staff, volunteers and program leaders, etc.) working within community recreation programs or centres. Inherent within these guidelines (and their associated Recommended Actions) is the commitment to develop healthy and supportive relationships and cultivate positive participant-centered experiences. To that end, guidelines five through ten are intended to support the actions and interactions of managers and program coordinators.

Our role in supporting people with mental health challenges:

While these guidelines support recreation personnel in working with people with mental health challenges, participants are not required or expected to disclose information about their mental health concerns unless they choose to. Likewise, recreation personnel should not counsel participants in regards to specific mental health challenges or concerns, but should know where to refer participants if the need arises (e.g., Mental Health Mobile Crisis Telephone Line).

1. Practice Active Welcoming

A welcoming experience must begin as soon as people enter a recreation space or program, especially the first time.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: Recreation personnel could:
Greet participants as they arrive
Be available to talk to participants
Pay attention to how the person is receiving the interaction and adjust communication style accordingly (e.g., practice active listening skills)
Be receptive and open to questions
Promote a smooth transition from arrival to participation (e.g., having information readily available, answering questions, or walking participants to a class)
Be mindful of and respect peoples' personal space (e.g., physical space)
Get to know people individually (e.g., names, interests)
Determine what participants need to experience success, especially the first time they come (e.g., ask people what they want or need from participation)

2. Focus on Relationship Building

Positive relationships are a key component of welcoming environments. Relationship building refers to the processes through which staff, volunteers and program leaders build relationships with *and* among participants.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: Recreation personnel could:
Ensure that participants know the instructor's name
Communicate to all program/center participants that there is a shared responsibility to create safe and welcoming environments
Work with participants to collectively establish group norms
Promote sensitivity to culture, ethnicity, and gender identity differences

Actively integrate new participants into an existing group
Provide opportunities for participants to easily introduce themselves to one another
Support and encourage social interaction among participants
Promote 'add on' opportunities, such as social time after a recreation program or activity
Direct messages or instructions to the entire group to avoid singling out specific individuals
Provide directions or requests as positive, simple messages that convey what the participant should do, rather than what not to do

3. Reduce Stigma and Barriers

We must be intentional in our efforts to remove stigma and personal barriers to participating and to ensure participants' safety. For persons living with ongoing mental health challenges feeling shy, lacking confidence, feeling worried about not living up to expectations, and fear of being judged can be barriers to their participation and enjoyment of recreation programs.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: Recreation Personnel could:
Support individual needs by being accepting and understanding
Be mindful of activities that may be challenging, upsetting or triggering (e.g., sudden or unexpected program changes, loud noises etc.)
Demonstrate confidence when talking with participants who self-identify as living with mental health challenges about their mental health concerns related to recreation (e.g., be open to working with participants to address their concerns; you don't have to have all the answers)
Use person-first language consistently (<i>See R4MH Glossary</i>)

4. Foster Engagement, Competence and Confidence

The benefits of recreation to a person’s mental health are more likely to be experienced when they are actively participating and experiencing fun and success.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: Recreation personnel could:
Work to determine the suitability of the program to individual skill level
Provide clear class/program descriptions, including the skills, equipment required, and abilities needed for successful participation
Use messaging to reinforce that participation is voluntary
Emphasize the importance of having fun
Be available before and after programs to answer questions
Take all questions seriously and offer thoughtful responses
Suggest modifications to meet the unique and individual needs of participants (e.g., in the context of a class)

The following guidelines are directed at program managers and coordinators who typically have responsibility for overall programming-related decisions within their centres. As part of this they are also responsible for ensuring training and establishing policies and procedures for staff, leaders, and volunteers.

5. Identify and Address Barriers to Access and Actively Promote Participation

This guideline is implemented by systematically analyzing and addressing logistical, financial, and social barriers to accessing recreation.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Program Managers and Coordinators could:
Provide clear program descriptions, including skills, equipment required, and abilities needed for successful participation
Develop and use promotional materials that show diversity and are inclusive of all people
Develop and use promotional materials that are predominately visual, and cognizant of diverse literacy levels
Disseminate promotional materials widely, through several channels, to promote access (e.g., social media, in print, available on site)
Support people in getting to recreation and leisure facilities and events by providing information onsite about transportation options

Create transportation initiatives (e.g., taxi chits, bus passes, shared ride system)
Create initiatives that offset financial burdens to attending programs and participation (e.g., subsidized costs)
Develop and use a check-in system with participants, if individually desired, to touch base after missed classes (e.g., by phone or email)
Adjust protocols to ensure that participants are not penalized financially or otherwise for missed classes or programs
Ensure that participants receive information that classes or programs do not require 100% attendance
Create, support, and promote spaces for social time on site
Create, support, and promote spaces for quiet time on site

6. Support People to Be and Feel Prepared

This means supporting people to arrive prepared to participate in community recreation facilities, centres or programs. Knowing what to expect at a program, including awareness of the recommended clothing, equipment, and social norms, helps people feel prepared and ready for participation in new recreation settings. Fundamental to this guideline is the recognition that many persons with mental health challenges live in chronic poverty.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Program Managers and Coordinators could:
Create and distribute detailed descriptions, inclusive of visual information, of what participants can expect and what will be needed (e.g., what to bring, what to wear, and rules)
Develop and promote a free or low cost equipment loan program to support people in obtaining necessary equipment
Provide lockers and/or locks to participants through a minimum-cost loan program
Allow participants to observe or try out programming according to an established, flexible fee schedule
Develop and promote opportunities for participants to bring family and/or peers to support participation at no additional cost
Support goal setting, including identifying interests and abilities, and how these might match potential program opportunities

7. Facilitate Opportunities for Peer Support and Shared Leadership

This guideline recognizes that peer support can significantly reduce barriers to participation. Peers are often considered those who have personal experiences with mental health challenges, although they can also be thought of more broadly as companions or supporters. Peers can provide social support and motivation to attend community-based recreation, particularly for those visiting a recreation setting or program for the first time. An informed and caring instructor can play some of the roles of a peer supporter.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Program Managers and Coordinators could:
Create and implement a peer support system; this would be a person who lives with mental health challenges, and is able to go with the participant in a supportive capacity to an activity for the first time, or if desired, to continue to participate with the participant at no additional cost
Create and implement a volunteer program host system: Someone who takes on responsibility for greeting participants who come to a program in exchange for a reduction in their own fees
Actively involve people living with mental health challenges in planning, providing feedback, and in leadership and peer support roles
Establish opportunities for user-led programming
Actively solicit feedback from participants (e.g., by having suggestion boxes with forms that are easy to complete, soliciting oral feedback, and holding group discussions)

8. Build Flexibility Into Overall Centre Programming

This recognizes that people may need time to try different programs or to participate in ways that support their unique needs, challenges, confidence or skills.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Program Managers and Coordinators could:
Create opportunities for participants to try something new without commitment (e.g., through drop-in classes, open houses, samplers)
Provide frequent group and individual tours of the centre, orientation sessions, and information about available programs (e.g., where and how to register)
Design programs that provide both structure and variety (e.g., accommodate variations in skills and knowledge, provide opportunities for skills-building/fundamental skills development)
Incorporate leisure and/or wellness education into programming (e.g., providing information about recovery, positive mental health, awareness of benefits of recreation, getting connected to community, recreation activity skills building)

9. Collaborate and Coordinate with Mental Health Agencies

People living with mental health challenges are better served when service providers in recreation and mental health agencies work together.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Program Managers and Coordinators could:
Promote recreation and leisure programs and services to clients and staff of mental health agencies (e.g., distribute promotional materials at mental health agencies)
Invite mental health practitioners, advocates and supporters to participate in program development, education, and marketing initiatives
Become more knowledgeable about self-directed and/or community-based options for recreation, and actively refer people to these (e.g., recreation programming offered through other community-based organizations)

10. Build Mental Health Awareness and Confidence in All Staff and Volunteers

To help all staff, leaders and volunteers who interact with adults to feel confident to interact positively and to support people who may be struggling with their mental health, training related to mental health is essential.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Program Managers and Coordinators could:
Ensure basic training in mental health for as many staff members and volunteers possible (e.g., Mental Health First Aid, Recreation for Mental Health training)
Require demonstrated foundational knowledge of mental health as part of hiring process
Actively include people who have lived experiences with mental health challenges as speakers at in-service training, as experts in their own lives and experiences

Using this document in practice:

There are a number of ways that the above guidelines and recommendations can be used in practice. Some suggestions are provided below:

- ◆ **Audit Tool:** Work through the document to determine which recommendations are currently being enacted in your facility, and those that are not yet implemented or possibly not relevant. You could repeat this periodically (at a fixed interval, for example) to assess your progress.
- ◆ **Impact and Feasibility Assessment:** To determine which recommendations are 'low hanging fruit', you could assess impact (i.e., how impactful will this recommendation be for people with mental health challenges?) and how feasible is this for your organization to implement (i.e., are there specific recommendations that seem easier to address than others?) You could rate each of these on a five-point scale (one being lowest impact or feasibility, and five being most impact and feasibility). Guidelines with high impact and that are perceived as highly feasible are 'low hanging fruit', and are a good starting place to initiate change.
- ◆ **Planning Tool:** Working individually or in groups, determine recommendations that you would like to implement. For a chosen guideline, work to determine what is needed to successfully implement the practice. Questions you might ask include: Who needs to be involved? What are the costs? What is a reasonable timeline? What challenges are anticipated and how could you plan to mitigate these? What are strengths that will support this action and how could you activate these?